Understanding Your Prompt

A clearly written assignment will ask that you perform one task well. That task will be communicated in the assignment’s main verb: for instance, explain, compare, or prove. Once you have identified this verb and are certain of your instructor’s expectations, you can write a paper with confidence.

The following is a list of key verbs commonly found in academic assignments. Each verb asks you to think about and develop materials in a focused, particular way. When you are assigned a paper, consult this list to clearly isolate your task.

Important Word Meanings in Assignments

Summarize: Sum up; give the main points briefly (ex: Summarize the ways in which humans preserve food.)

Evaluate: Give the good points and the bad ones; appraise; give an opinion regarding the value of; talk over the advantages and limitations. (ex: Evaluate the contributions of teaching machines.)

Contrast: Bring out the points of difference. (ex: Contrast the novels of Jane Austen and William Makepeace Thackeray.)

Explain: Make clear; tell “how” to do; tell the meaning of. (ex: Explain how humans can, at times, trigger a full-scale rainstorm.)

Describe: Give an account of; tell about; give a word picture of. (ex: Describe the Pyramids of Giza.)

Define: Give the meaning of a word or concept; place it in the class to which it belongs and set it off from others in the same class. (ex: Define the term “archetype.”)

Compare: Bring out the points of similarity and points of difference. (ex: Compare the legislative branches of the state government and the national government.)
Discuss: Talk over; consider from various points of view; present the different sides of. (ex: Discuss the use of pesticides in controlling mosquitoes.)

Criticize: State your opinion of the correctness or merits of an item or issue; criticism may approve or disapprove. (ex: Criticize the increasing use of alcohol by college students.)

Justify: Show good reasons for; give your evidence; present facts to support your position. (ex: Justify the American entry into World War II.)

Trace: Follow the course of; follow the trail of; give a description of progress. (ex: Trace the development of television in school instruction.)

Interpret: Make plain; give the meaning of; give your thinking about; translate [so that your reader will understand]. (ex: Interpret the poetic line, “The sound of cobwebs snapping is the noise of my life.”)

Prove: Establish the truth of something by giving factual evidence or logical reasons. (ex: Prove that in a full-employment economy, a society can get more of one product only by giving up another product.)

Illustrate: Use a word picture, a diagram, a chart, or a concrete example to clarify a point. (ex: Illustrate the use of catapults in the amphibious warfare of Alexander.)

Analyze: Divide and study parts to determine how something works, what it means, or why it is significant. (ex: Use Lanyon’s theory of deviance to analyze the behavior of some group you know well.)